

CAiIA-STAR Symposium: 'Extreme parameters. New dimensions of interactivity'
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A Jelly Baby on the Knee [*]



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Abstract: Imagine a table in a café (smoking/non-smoking as you prefer). There are three places two are occupied. On one side sits an artist and writer (male or female) who began a career working with film and then moved on to computer animation and now works with sound installations in unconventional venues. On the other is a writer and artist (male or female) who also made films but has written for a decade on the history of technology —particularly cinema. They are talking mostly about the same thing —sometimes at cross-purposes— but always driving the conversation in the same direction. They insist that we are inhabiting a present which is like thick membrane: on one side is the past and on the other is the future as it has been projected by other writers and artists. The purpose of their conversation is to try to identify the differential pressures either side of the present in order to understand the dynamics of the processes of osmosis that they think is going on all about them. Imagine a table in a café (smoking/non-smoking as you prefer). In the empty place there is the reader: a fully desiring articulate reader anxious and able to make interventions, quarrel, agree, become exasperated and possible even slightly bored anxious to reach for the fast forward button or re-edit the tape in a non-linear environment. Imagine the outcome of such a scene. What might happen to ideas which were born in conventional text treated with such disrespect? What might happen when claims are subject to different categories of evidence, voices that shift from past to present, from impersonal to colloquial or when asides and ironies are collapsed into a single image, and fully developed arguments are pitched alongside flip one-liners written with the portentous ring of the announcement of the end of the world? Imagine a Jelly baby standing on your knee.

We will come to the question of the title of this paper later —to begin with I want to rehearse some of the material that has preceded today's presentation in CAiIA-STAR composite sessions in Caerleon, Paris and Turin. At the last *Consciousness Reframed Conference in a paper entitled Not Science, or History: post digital biological art and a distant cousin* I argued that despite the apparent convergence of art and science, bio-electronic art which deals with artificial life and genetic engineering should be understood as making a significant critical intervention in contemporary debates about the progress of both science and history. Boundary erosion in the arts, for example, has allowed for new combinations of belief systems and practices as the distinction between the artist and the scientist has been apparently dissolved. However this is not to be confused with an idea that in some magical way artists are 'doing science' and vice versa. This solubility is not the consequence of art and science changing, but of an emergent form of consciousness which understands itself as complicit in the stories and illusions necessary to organise data. This has no value for the scientist, instead it embodies an intellectual formalism which resonates with Gosse's brilliant intellectual gymnastics. He may have failed to explain the origin of man to the satisfaction of a society committed to the exploitation of mineral wealth, but his explanation of Adam's navel, much like bio-electronic art, causes

us to reflect on the illusionist aspects of both history and science.

In Stockholm and Paris in *The Post Digital Imaginary* I developed the next chapter in this argument by looking at the history of technology from the point of view of a will to leave the body. I suggested ways in which research into a nineteenth-century technology such as early cinema might be valid in understanding technology today, and identified a number of stylistic resemblances between early cinema, personal computing and the Internet. I also claimed that there is some value in applying one analytical methodology to both 'old' and 'new' media. By looking at digital technology through the filter of an extremely well developed discourse in early film history, softer determinist accounts of digital technology can emerge which are not dependent on the premises of progress nor those of various forms of Postmodernist criticism. In a reverse angle, so to speak, it also argues that a close tracking of digital technology and its critical discourses as they unfold in various entertainment forms can tell us much about the attractions and fascinations that early cinema had a century ago for its audiences. In short I claimed a continuity in audio visual history and criticism which is a valuable addition, even antidote to the hyperbole and unsupportable technological determinism that digital media has attracted both in academic and commercial commentary.



Crucial to that discussion was of course the emergence of tele technologies such as television and manned flight. I was especially concerned with what I detected as the cultural imperative of telepresences in a specific convergence of these technologies. And for fear of repeating myself too much this 1928 image seemed to speak to those desires. In particular escamatic experiences in which the observer watches the normal world from a point of view which is not coincident with his physical body and those in which this gives way to a metachronic experience of complete hallucination. Indeed the early experiments with television emergent stage appear to have more to do with the depiction of ectoplasm than photography, radio and realism. In addition I argued that, in the same way that the cinema masked its ancestry of table-tapping and parapsysics in its institutional phase, the transcendental potential of heavier than air flight to free the individual from the customary constraints of the material world became

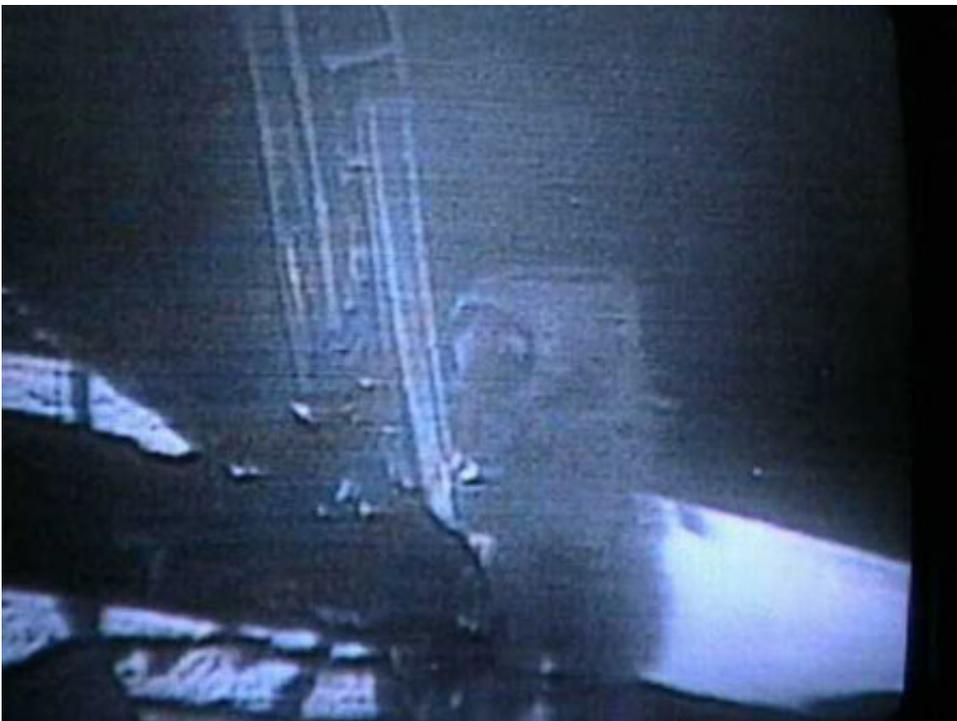
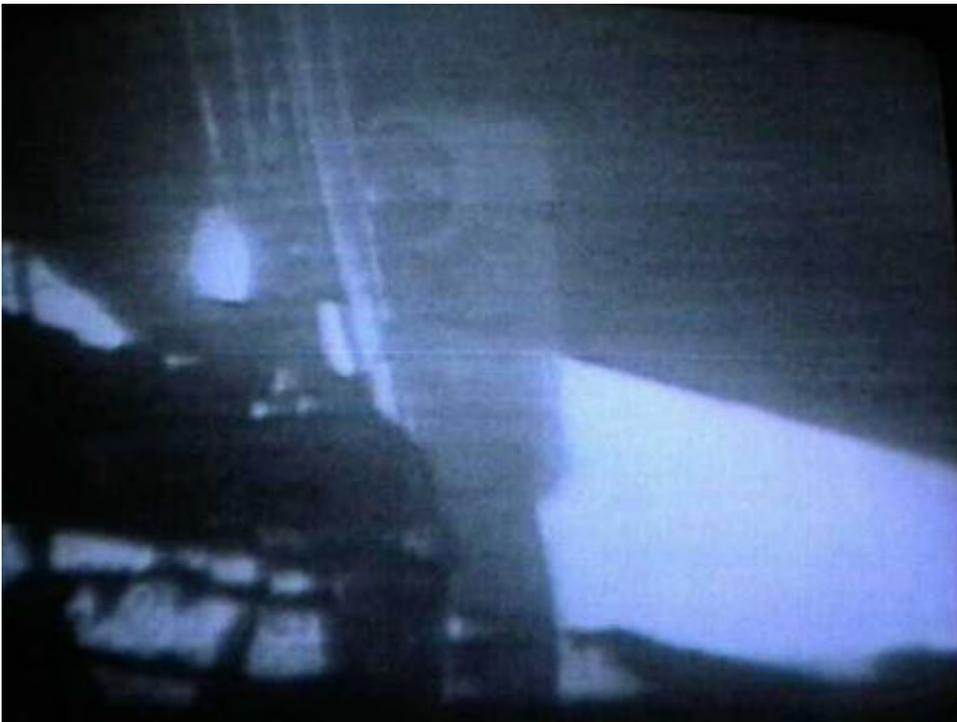
reinterpreted in the passenger airliner and cargo plane. Consequently the recovery of this fascination with the 'other-worldly' was equally short-lived as the brief excursion with television as telepresence gave way to broadcasting and the tele-event.



Finally on the most recent leg of this knight's move around Europe, in Turin in On the avoidance of miracles I set out the triad of Magic, Science and Belief and argued that the progressive apotheosis of biology draws together—at least in the domain of human imagination and consciousness— three apparently quite antagonistic and mutually exclusive things—magic, technology and miracles. Or put another way— skilful trickery and charlatanism, rational explanation made manifest in predictable functions, and unquestioning belief in a higher force, find themselves as equal constituents in human soup. They are united around the shared cultural imperative of a total dissatisfaction with the chaining of vision to the materiality of the body. If the fascination and longing for ecsomatic (out of body) and metachronic (completely hallucinatory) experience has some determining impact on technology and science, and their subversive use elsewhere as an antidote to rationalism wilfully obscures the processes and methods, then quite possibly we have opened a new site to explore at the interface between science and art.



This new site that I have opened up for myself is a revisionism of the way we understand the history of science relative to an occult —or at least the occluded determination of— for want of a better term —the paranormal. The inspiration for this move came from a recent performance I did in a cinema using a standard miniature performance kit. I awarded an Oscar for best actor to Neil Armstrong for his part in Apollo 11 the Real Thing (Produced and Directed By the CIA and NASA in the Arizona Dessert). As I rewound the tape in my mind I noticed how ghostlike the footage of the first moon walk is when it is played on a big screen. One of the most advanced applications of science as technology was manifest as transparent sprites lumbering gracefully in a grainy other world that none but a few gifted and privileged people could ever confirm as having reality. The images of science at work seemed at that moment quite indistinguishable from its irrational other. The famous photographs of paranormal activity that flashed on my mindscreen screen were undoubtedly the consequence of the sugar high from eating all the jellybabies at once, but nonetheless in a more sober moment it struck me that television as a technology (not as a popular medium) had not only satisfied the cultural imperative for telepresence that I had argued early but in its early stages (and later ones in Wales) had reconciled both the apparent rationalism of science and the apparent antithesis of the paranormal. This was something that media archaeologists have long recognised in the popular reception of the first screenings of films but have dismissed as the momentary strangeness of seeing detailed images move from surface to depth. In the visual correspondence between ectoplasm, the television and the moonwalk (set out above) a more radical thesis appeared to lurk.



In the first place it suggests that historians of early cinema might consider the occult lure of the cinematographe not as something that diminished with familiarity with the medium, but a dimension that reverted to its familiar cultural position as an undercurrent in a rational flow. It may be argued, as I did at the first Consciousness Reframed conference using the Pamela Anderson vehicle BarbWire as a text that it is possibly much nearer the surface of mainstream cinema than any critics have so far suggested. Secondly the visual familiarity between the images suggests that technology as a representation of science provides a rationalist materialist site in which quite profound oppositions are reconciled: it can be both understandable and incomprehensible as for example in computer programmes, and both profoundly good and profoundly evil as in the recent discussions of genetic engineering. Finally the connection that science appeared to form between irreconcilable oppositions of normal and paranormal draws attention once again to the strange homology that teaches us to regard all that is consigned to superstition with great suspicion whilst superstitiously following the truth claims of a scientific rationalism that few of us understand. As

I argued in Turin such sleight of hand is effectively passed through the scientific community's ambivalence to the determining effects of performance as a structural element of the truth claims that it supports.



The lessons of the New Historicist movement of the 1980s (if it can be called a movement) building on the work of Giambattista Vico and Herder refused the universalising reductionism and idealism of a Cartesian world view and the triumphalism of Grand theory. Where the humanities under the influence of scientific method had pursued unity —always seeking the big causes and transhistorical truths, New Historicists settled for the view that any single culture is only able to experience a narrow range of the countless possibilities open to it, consequently the historical project should focus on the singular, the specific and the individual. Given this, perhaps it is not surprising that post the history of Enlightenment science has come under particular scrutiny. New historians of science were sceptical of the history of great ideas that had shaped our vision of scientific progress and revisiting the evidence from the perspective of the individual it quickly became clear that the biggest of big ideas, the so-called Scientific Revolution was not only an historically unfounded and dubious concept but also a very modern one dating from the late 1930s.

The New Historians asked what it meant to do science at a particular time. Using new kinds of evidence such as laboratory note-books, and anthropological methodologies, the performative aspects of knowledge appeared to be much more powerful than earlier histories had admitted. Eminent scientists such as Hooke, perhaps the founder of experimental method, and Newton were found to have falsified their notes after they had formulated a theory. A practice that it is believed was common throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In our own time there may be checks on this as a consequence, Bruno Latour has argued, regardless of what is being studied, to do science is to measure and produce data on paper. For Latour, to ignore this is to misunderstand the object of study and to ignore the determining effects of falsifying notes is to produce bad history. A century earlier for great figures in the history of big ideas such as Humphrey Davey and his pupil Faraday doing science was doing theatre and they choreographed lectures for their theatrical effects and this shaped the trajectory of scientific knowledge. Indeed electricity particularly appealed to the experimentalist/performers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century for much the same reasons that experimental research into space flight is so appealing. The theory of both follows the practice. You have to do it to prove it, consequently as a performance it is both spectacular and

convincing—even if the conspiracy theorists are right that it was all acted out in the desert, like a perfectly performed conjuring trick, material experimental reality is posited as a human construction within a range of possibilities.



One of the many possibilities that was particularly stimulated by the observation of the effects of magnetism and electricity linked as they were to vital forces, was the existence of parallel realities. To be sure not such a radical idea in a Judeo/Christian society, but one that took hold in a particular way in the nineteenth century in an intoxicating mix of science conjuring and conspiracy theory. Comic as these photographs of extoplasm are to us now they were no less convincing to the nineteenth century informed observer than the transparent jellybaby that left a footprint in moon dust. It is interesting to compare the history of spiritualism, parapsychology, and the paranormal, with the Whig histories of science. Where the former is one of determined exposure of error—hidden observers and investigative magicians such as Houdini, the other is a parade of great men whose claims have been regarded as historically valuable even though they were subsequently known to be wrong. At stake in this asymmetrical treatment of human affairs is nothing less than Paradise. Where on the one hand the pursuit of knowledge was to identify the perfect conditions for a perfect existence, on the other was the premise that the human being like a jelly baby emerges with so little instinct that it is almost infinitely malleable and shapes its identity in response to local conditions aware all the time of the range of possibilities that are not developed. Paradise is not a place or a time, not Eden but a thick membrane in which we stabilise local conditions to form an identity.

As I argued relentlessly in *Early Cinema and the Technological Imaginary*, there is some evidence that the Cinematographe did not emerge from an obsession with realism and movement the way that materialist histories demand, but that a convergence of an obsession with other dimensions and a radical shift in the relationship between ordinary people and technology converged on a number of machines and reinterpreted them to satisfactorily stabilise irreconcilable ideas. Not to acknowledge this has contributed to a flawed history of cinema that we are unlikely to recover from. Similarly in this paper I have argued that to repress the determining impact of the paranormal in the history of science skews our understanding of what science is, what it means to do science what it means when artists do science and incidentally what the artist might recover from engaging with it.



During the writing of this paper I was the fortunate recipient of a clever 3D mouse-mat that brought together many of the themes that I was thinking about. This may have been a paranormal message or telepathy or coincidence — it did however epitomise the mythic function of two powerful popular obsessions separated by 150 years came together in such an apparently comfortable way as an image— the obsession with a third dimension and remote presence . An even odder coincidence occurred a few days later when I noticed after yet another miniature performance I noticed yet another explanation for the moon walk conspiracy theorists —a inexplicable ectoplasmic residue in space.



Notes:

[*] The full text of this is published in ASCOTT. R. (ed.). (2000). *Art, Technology, Consciousness: mind@large*. Exeter: Intellect Books. pp. 24-28. ISBN 1-84150-041-0.

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